A VIEW FROM ABROAD ON BELGIAN COLONIAL HISTORY.

Interview with Sokhieng Au by Joris Vandendriessche

Sokhieng Au is a Pegasus Marie Curie Fellow of the Flanders Research Foundation (FWO) at the Research Group Cultural History since 1750 at the University of Leuven. Her research has focused on the history of medicine, colonial science, and Southeast Asian studies. In 2011, her book *Mixed Medicines: Health and Culture in French Colonial Cambodia* was published with the University of Chicago Press. Currently, she is approaching a new research subject: the history of anatomy in the Congo. We meet for a discussion on the historiography of (Belgian) colonial medicine and the role of international mobility in such research.

By way of introduction, can you tell us about your general research interests and previous career trajectory?

I started out at Berkeley, where I did a PhD in history, with a background in the history of science and an interest in Southeast Asia. My original aim was to look at evolutionary ideas and how these were taken up by Cambodian elites. I actually found that because there was such a small stratum of elites, you could not really speak of a more general adoption of any kind of ideas about race. The literate Khmers were focusing more on Buddhism and its relation to modernity. So I followed the sources and let the project become what it became, and it ended up being a project on the history of medicine.

Afterwards I taught at Northwestern University as an assistant visiting professor, largely to students who aspired to enter medical school or pursue degrees in public health. I was amazed at how the students were so surprised on the historical, cultural, sociological perspective to medicine and health. How can you work in public health and not get it? But the opposite is also true. We don't understand what it means to get things done in the world. At that time, with no real job security, I started thinking about how great it would be to actually focus on praxis, to 'do' something in the world. I then got a job offer for a tenure track position at the University of Florida, but also a scholarship to pursue a Master's in Public Health at Johns Hopkins University. I decided on the later. Afterwards, I moved with my husband, first to Colombia, where I finished my book, and later to Belgium. Here I learnt about the project on the history of anatomy at KU Leuven, and became interested in its colonial dimension. The Pegasus Fellowship of the FWO enabled me to start up this new research.

For your current research, you moved from studying French colonial health policy in Cambodia to anatomy in the Congo. Was this a smooth transition for you?

Because of my background, I feel very comfortable in the history of medicine, which you need to understand what is going on in the colony in terms of vaccination and health policies. But what surprised me about anatomy in the Congo is that so much about it is *not* medical. I'm now learning about visual culture, the treatment of death, issues at the threshold of life and death. Studying these issues can be very fulfilling. Anatomy encompasses everything: it's about art and representation of the body, about performance, about material culture, about how the body is turned into a commodity. It takes you to all these realms.

More generally, the parallels in colonial medicine are certainly there. In certain epochs, the way colonial observers speak of the indigenous subject is sort of uniform. But for the Belgian colonies, the significant role of missionaries in health care surprised me the most. This religious aspect of colonialism has also guided my archival research. I'm now looking not only into the *archives africaines* in the Foreign Ministry, but also into the archives of religious orders in KADOC. I'm also examining the Baptist missionary archives in Oxford and the American missionary archives in Atlanta.

You mentioned being surprised at the importance of missionaries. Do you consider this as part of the 'particularity' of the Congo in European colonialism – an argument often made by Anglo-Saxon historians?

The question of the specificity of the Congo comprises more than health care alone. It relates, I think, to the fact that the actual colonial state started very late, as it took over the colony from Leopold II in 1908. And in terms of all kinds of provisioning - education, but also public health - it developed slowly. The particular role of the religious orders in developing colonial medicine needs to be understood in this context. It is something you rarely see in other colonies. At a moment when medicine as a science was separated from healing as an art, non-specialists increasingly had no place in medical care. This was not the case in the Congo.

I found it strange that colonial administrators referred to Catholics as the 'national' missions and to Protestants as the 'foreign' missions. But they had to look at the national missions to provide education and health care. The *école chapelle* of the Jesuits provided nearly all the schooling. The Catholic sisters provided most of the nurses to the colonial hospitals. Into the 1930s, they tried to train indigenous male nurses, but with little success. This seems related also to the conditions put forward by the Catholic missions: their moral character had to be formed, which could best be done in boarding schools, but these then required great financial investments. It really did not work very well.

What also seems unique to the Congo is that the Protestant missions had almost as many hospitals as the government in the beginning. But the Catholics had nearly no hospitals; they simply provided the nurses for the hospitals of the colonial state and ran asylums. This could lead to all sorts of conflicts over subsidies and patients. In the Baptist missionary archives, I read about how one of the government doctors was harassing patients in the Protestant hospital, telling them to go the state dispensary. He was not anti-religious, he was anti-Protestant; he was, in fact, very religious. I would really love to do more work on the role of these missionaries in the colonial state. How did they insert themselves into politics? To what extent did they act as witnesses against the atrocities of private companies? Atrocities occurred in all colonies. But I was surprised at the extent to which they remained unchecked in the Congo Free State.

In which ways do you think the study of Belgian (colonial) history can benefit from international mobility? What are the advantages of an 'outsider view'?

Of course, it is always advantageous to add a new perspective to a given field. This also goes for Belgians who go abroad and enter new fields. For Belgian colonial history in particular, I do think the field has trouble abandoning a national framework. If you look, for example, at French colonial history - there are so many different people who engage in this field. The same goes for British colonial history. Part of the explanation for the lack of international interest in the Belgian case, I think, is that many scholars consider Belgium too small. And there is, of course, the language issue. When Anglo-Saxon scholars set out to learn French, they imagine themselves doing research in Paris or Aix-en-Provence, but not necessarily in Brussels, which seems somehow more intimidating. Also, there's the additional idea that you would have to know at least some Dutch.

To attract more international interest, it would help, I think, if Belgian scholars would make the links between the Belgian Congo and all sorts of foreign and international movements more explicit. The colony itself was of course not isolated. Rodhain, the second director of the Institute for Tropical Medicine, on whom I'm also doing research, corresponded with colleagues in many different colonies. By paying attention to those aspects, scholars from elsewhere might also become interested in the field, which, in turn, would help to understand the specificity of the Belgian case. So much is still to be done; not only for the Congo but also for Rwanda. The volume of archives that hasn't been looked at is amazing. It seems only relatively recently, as Martin Ewans has argued, that Belgian researchers have started to look critically at their colonial history and take up new themes.[1]

What are your experiences so far in Belgian academe? Have you noticed any particularities?

Belgian academe has certainly been very welcoming to me, coming from abroad and following my husband here. What has struck me in particular is the degree of internal collaboration. I've worked in many places with considerable pressure and competitiveness, which often resulted in relatively isolated projects. I'm not saying such competition does not exist here, but I do think Belgians more actively seek collaboration. Undoubtedly, it's because Belgian academe is rather small. But part of it seems also related to the funding structures, which strongly support collaborative work. Perhaps this collaborative aspect is also reflected in the tendency I noticed towards multiple authorship. Besides co-editing, which is well established academic practice everywhere, the frequent 'co-writing' of articles among Belgian historians has also struck me. Among American scholars this is certainly not so common.

Many thanks for this interview!

1. Ewans, Martin, Belgium and the Colonial Experience, in: *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, vol. 11, nr. 2, 2003, pp. 167-180.